

## ***FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** December 20, 2012

**Agenda Item:** Reintroduction of Bighorn Sheep into the Bridger Mountains

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Approval of Proposed Rule

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**Background:** FWP proposes to reintroduce bighorn sheep into the Bridger Mountains. Like many mountain ranges in southwest Montana, the Bridgers once supported a native population of bighorns into the early 1900's. The purpose of the reintroduction is to establish a long-term viable bighorn sheep population that will provide new and valuable recreational opportunities including wildlife viewing and sport hunting. Biologically, a new bighorn population in the Bridgers would increase biodiversity and restore a native species after a 100-year absence. From a conservation perspective, increasing the number and distribution of viable bighorn populations in Montana has long-term survival benefits for the species.

The greatest challenge facing a successful reintroduction in the Bridger Mountains is the presence of at least 10 domestic sheep herds within 1.5 to 12 miles of the bighorn sheep release site. The comingling of domestic sheep and bighorns has resulted in disease-related bighorn sheep die-offs in Montana and throughout the west. Based on FWP's Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy (2010) and other management sources, the Bridgers are a high-risk area for disease transmission. The disease issue has led to the development of Alternative C which attempts to reduce risk by entering into voluntary domestic sheep management agreements with local sheep producers. However, it should be noted that some local livestock producers and at least one sheep producer is opposed to reintroducing bighorns due to the potential negative impacts on their ranching operations.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** A draft EA was released in November followed by a 22-day comment period (Nov. 5-26, 2012) that included a public meeting held at the FWP Region 3 Headquarters in Bozeman on November 15. Forty-seven individuals or groups submitted comments; 34 comments supported the proposal, 10 opposed the proposal, 2 did not express an opinion, and 1 suggested another alternative.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** The EA includes 3 alternatives: Alternative A (No Action) Bighorns would not be introduced at this time;; Alternative B (Proposed Action) 30-40 bighorns would be released with possible follow up releases; Alternative C (Modified Proposed Action), release of bighorns contingent upon entering into voluntary domestic sheep management agreements with sheep producers to achieve separation between domestic and wild sheep. The analysis of this project revealed in several benefits and few negative impacts. However, the future of this project depends on reducing the risk of disease transmission between domestic and bighorn sheep.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** Alternative C allows for more work with landowners and Bighorn Sheep advocates to find support and mitigations for a successful reintroduction of Bighorn Sheep in the Bridger Mountains.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Commission endorse FWP's decision to adopt Alternative C.